

## THE STUDY OF TEXTS

I HAVE BEEN asked to address the question "How ought the next generation of political philosophers to be educated?" I suppose what is meant is really "How ought the next generation of professors of political philosophy to be educated?" We cannot prescribe to genius; and it can, for the most part, take care of itself. Philosophy is not a profession like medicine or shoemaking. Professors of political philosophy can, however, be trained, and their function is to take advantage of genius and to help to make it accessible to others. They can also help the philosophers by preserving in the form of a tradition what was taught by the philosophers—thereby both serving the public good and keeping alive the matter on which potential philosophers must feed.

But our question is a good one, for it contains an "ought": and if we succeed in answering it, we shall prove that political philosophy is possible, that it is capable of producing "valid normative statements." Our claim to recognition stands or falls with this capacity. The question is also good because it forces us to take stock of ourselves from the most advantageous standpoint: our students. We cannot, from this perspective, fail to look beyond our specialties to the whole human being we should like to see come to be: and we must look to the most general problems of our discipline. No time could be more appropriate for our questioning, for political philosophy's claim to be the queen of the social sciences or the study of man as well as the guide of statesmen is scarcely honored. Political philosophy is in crisis; its very possibility is doubted, nay denied, by the most powerful movements of contemporary thought. And that crisis is identical with the crisis of the West, because the crisis of the West is a crisis of belief—belief in the justice of our principles.

In order to educate for political philosophy, there must be some agreement about what it is. It might be suggested that political philosophy is the quest for knowledge of the best way of life, of the most comprehensive good, or of justice and the best regime. This implies that there exists a good which is knowable. Both the existence of the good and our capacity to know it by reason are denied by positivism and historicism, and two most powerful intellectual forces of our time. One important strand of contemporary thought denies even the desirability of such knowledge.

Of course, political philosophy is the quest for such knowledge, not necessarily, nor even probably, its actualization. In fact, since philosophy, by its very name, implies the pursuit of wisdom—an unending search in which every certitude is counterpoised by a more powerful doubt—the best political philosophy can provide is clarity about the fundamental alternatives to the solution of the human problem. Here again there is a presupposition: there are permanent alternatives which can be identified.

Given that what is wanted is an openness to the fundamental alternatives, what education conduces most to it? I shall note only in passing the kind of character required for profiting from an education in political philosophy. Its presence must be assumed; one can at best encourage it; it cannot be made. The prime constituents are love of justice and love of truth. These two are in some measure in contradiction, and a discrete mating of the two is rare; for love of justice borders on and usually involves indignation, which overwhelms the dispassionateness and lack of partisanship requisite to science, while love of truth removes a person from that concern for the particular demanded by justice. Aristotle says that political science lies somewhere between mathematics and rhetoric. The attempt to make it mathematical would destroy its phenomena. Abandoning it to mere taste would be a renunciation of reason in the most important questions. It partakes of theory and practice, reason and passion, and from the two extreme perspectives seems either unscientific or not engaged. It is therefore particularly vulnerable to the temptations of the extremes—to sham science or fanatic commitment. (In this light the wildly varying dispositions toward political philosophy in the last generation can be seen as a particular expression of a perennial problem—a problem exacerbated by a new kind of science and a new kind of religiosity.) The man who practices political philosophy must make that union, impossible according to Pascal, between *l'esprit de géométrie* and *l'esprit de finesse*, and will appear open to the charges of being unscientific and irrelevant. He must resist public opinion and his own conscience.

Now, given this disposition, what is necessary for nourishing it properly? The answer is the careful study of texts, of the classic texts of the tradition—that and not much else. This is what is most needful—always, and particularly in our time. This assertion appeals neither to the behavioral scientists nor to those who think our purpose is not to understand reality, but to change it. It seems at best merely scholarly, denying as it does the decisive superiority of our current knowledge over that of the past and the peculiarity or essentially unique character of our problems. These objections to the study of texts are perpetually made, and political philosophy by very definition both calls them forth and rejects them. But they appear particularly strong today, when knowledge of the tradition is particularly weak. Therefore they must be addressed.

First, to speak to the reasons for the concentration on texts at all times, as opposed to our very special need, it is hard to imagine serious reflection which begins *de novo*, which is not sublimated to a higher level by a richly developed literary-philosophic tradition, transmitted in the form of writings. However radical a break from the tradition a thinker may make, the consciousness of the problems, the very awareness that there are problems as well as the knowledge of what it takes to respond to them, comes from being imbued with that tradition. This is not to deny that the problems are permanent and ubiquitous or that the human mind is at all times and places potentially capable of grasping them. It is not an assertion that the character of knowledge is essentially traditional or that the mind is essentially related to a particular culture. But there are preconditions to the mind's activity; it must above all have substance on which to work. Raw experience does not suffice. Experience comes to sight in the form of opinion, and the examination and elaboration of opinions makes experience broader and deeper. Only he who has seen through the eyes of profound and subtle observers can be aware of the complex articulation of things. Socrates without the teachings of Parmenides and Heraclitus would not have had his issues to address, nor would his superiority have been tested were his competition not of this quality. I venture to suggest that great philosophic men were almost always great scholars. They were students of their predecessors, not for the reasons which ordinarily motivate scholars, but because they believed, almost literally, that their salvation depended on it, that those earlier thinkers may have possessed the most important truths.

Great natural scientists have not in general needed to be great scholars. At most they have had to address themselves to the preceding generation of scientists in addition to their contemporaries. The mod-



ern natural sciences have been progressive, and their great success has made them a model for all learning. Their example would seem to prove that certain important questions can be decided forever, and that the thought of those who lived before their solution is decisively inferior to that of those who lived after.

Aristotle's knowledge of the movements of the heavens is doubtless inferior to that of almost any college student today. The model of the natural sciences has contributed much to the contempt for tradition in philosophy. Scholarship would seem to belong to the same order of rank in relation to philosophy as does history of science in relation to science. History of science is evidently of lower rank than science and is also not necessary to it.

The issue is whether modern science is not a special offshoot of modern philosophy—which is surely questionable. Its success may very well be due to its very partialness. The doubts now current about both the goodness of natural science and its relation to the real world give some support to this view. But, without entering into these difficult and troubling questions, surely natural science is not the privileged model. From the perspective of the whole, Aristotle does not come off so badly. A scientist like Bertrand Russell may despise him, but a philosopher like Hegel can show that, in the most important respects, Aristotle is superior to Newton. And to do so, Hegel had to know Aristotle very well. If Hegel had stayed within the confines of the scientific opinions of his contemporaries, he would not have seen the great difficulties in them. Aristotle was the precondition of Hegel's liberation. Machiavelli, Rousseau, and Nietzsche would not have enjoyed their admirable intellectual freedom if they did not know Plato well and had accepted the prevailing notion that he had simply been refuted or outdated. Every new beginning—like that of Descartes, for example—implies a certain rejection of the past. But it takes on its significance in the light of what it rejects. The new beginning becomes a tradition in its turn, and those who follow it forget its origins in a confrontation with another kind of thought. They are tradition-bound, and when the new tradition proves to have difficulties of its own, they are no longer aware of an alternative to it. Their perspective seems natural and, although itself problematic, superior to what went before, which is only known in the light of their tradition.

If we do not have completed, final wisdom, then our most important task is the articulation of the fundamental alternatives. This can be achieved only by maintaining an authentic knowledge of the best earlier thought, understood in its own terms, divested of distortions imparted to it by the thought which superseded it. Descartes

gave a full presentation not only of the prescientific world but also of the previous philosophic interpretations of it. Those who followed him accepted his rejection of earlier thought without themselves having gone through his analysis. What was still a serious alternative for Descartes no longer was one to his followers, and knowledge of it decayed. Thus knowledge of the tradition of philosophy is necessary to philosophy and required for philosophic freedom from tradition. Philosophy has, at its peaks, largely been dialogue between the greats, no matter how far separated in time. Without the voices which come from outside the cave constituted by our narrow horizon, we are ever more bound to it. And, according to at least one version, philosophy is liberation from the bonds which attach us to the cave.

In our time the study of texts is particularly needful. Never has the challenge to political philosophy been so great. Historicism, cultural relativism, and positivism join in agreeing that the old notions about the good and the way of knowing it must be wrong, that traditional political philosophy was a dream because it did not possess the historical insight or the awareness of the arbitrariness of value judgments. Although in doubt about most things, the modern movements are sure about that. They have not succeeded in finding a substitute guide for human life, and the present situation borders on nihilism. It behooves us to reflect on that situation, and to determine whether the understanding of things which results in it is adequate. The issue is whether our thought is derivative from a particular way of posing the problems, or whether it establishes its principles independently.

For example, the fact-value distinction is taken as a given by almost everyone today, no matter whether they are behavioral scientists or committed revolutionaries. Whether it has been proven that values cannot be derived from facts, or whether that very distinction has any grounding in the phenomena—as opposed to being a mere fiction resulting from certain doubtful philosophic interpretations of phenomena—is hardly discussed. The distinction is removed from the context from which it was derived and treated as an independent truth. And the knowledge of that context and what is opposed to it has decayed.

The search for a fresh start would require a purging of acquired prejudices and of all the categories of thought and speech derived from contemporary or recent philosophy. This task requires a return to the beginning points of thought, to the prescientific or prephilosophic or natural world. Otherwise one sees the world through the screen of

one articulation of the phenomena or another and is locked into the interpretation which one wishes to question. And the origins are peculiarly difficult of access for us who live in a world transformed by science and an intellectual atmosphere permeated by ideology. Ours is the age when philosophy and science—i.e., a certain kind of philosophy and science—have triumphed.

Philosophy and science have become involved in life and have changed the world. They are no longer observers or monitors. This is a unique circumstance; in the past, science did not try to replace the errors of the cave by substituting itself for them. In doing so, it risked becoming itself an error and no longer having the means to correct itself. Previously, the world had a diversity not caused by science, from which science could gather its interpretations; now the world tends to become the result of a particular interpretation, and, thus, to bear witness to it. For example, an economist's hypothesis that man's primary motive is gain can now become policy: a nation which encouraged that motive might end up producing men who prove the hypothesis. Only by looking outside that nation would one be able to regain a basis for recovering man as he is and for calling the hypothesis into question. In general, our world and our minds have much in common with my example. There is a unanimity in the world about the principles of science, while we are approaching one about the principles of politics. To see the latter uniformity, one need only compare the serious intellectual alternatives advanced in the 1930s—alternatives already relatively impoverished, compared with the past—with those available today. Now there are practically nothing but liberals and communists, who also share much with respect to ends, and there are practically no regimes with any vitality which are not supported by one of these two kinds of thought. The principle of equality, which is surely not simply self-evident, and should be the result of enlightenment and should be able to be defended against its serious opponents, has degenerated into a prejudice. Now, most serious of all, we are losing competence not only in those authors who could challenge our favorite beliefs but also in those who could best support them. The self-awareness of modern man depends on a knowledge of our intellectual roots and on a quest to rediscover the world on which the artificial world created by modernity is more or less well-grounded.

The threatened character of our self-awareness is strikingly illustrated by the most celebrated book on questions of political thought published in the Anglo-Saxon world in recent years, John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*. It presents a new theoretical ground for liberal de-



mocracy. But it begins by dismissing discussion of its egalitarian premise. It is only an analysis of what an egalitarian society should be, if you accept that equality is just. Rawls begins by assuming, or taking for granted, that which political philosophy always took as its task to prove or investigate. We can no longer take the alternatives seriously; we intuit the justice of equality. Thus the longing to *know* the truth about these questions is dogmatically denied its fulfillment and we are given over to what may only be the dominant prejudice of the day. Rawls devotes no time to proving that such knowledge is not accessible. From the outset the most important question, the one which motivated philosophy and the possible answer to which inspired and elevated those who think, is ruled out of bounds. But this is not what is most striking; it is rather Rawls's easygoingness about our situation, the absence of anguish over our impotence, the conviction that the consequences are not dreadful.

The other salient quality of this book, related to the first one, is the great ignorance of the tradition of political philosophy manifested in it. Although Rawls uses ideas which come to him through the tradition, they are accepted traditionally, used partially to support his predetermined purposes, and very frequently distorted. There is no indication that at any point he felt compelled to question his own framework because of the force of what came from outside.

Rawls's book attempts to renew the contract teaching of the state of nature theorists. But he abandons their insistence on nature and therefore finds himself without a sanction for justice and observance of the contract. More scholarship would have given him at least the outline of what would have been required to construct a meaningful contract. He would also have seen what possibilities have to be sacrificed in a contract teaching as opposed to one which, for example, regards man as naturally a political animal; and he would have been forced to come to grips with problems he hardly knows exist.

For example, Rawls puts forward a doctrine of "primary goods," ultimately derived from Hobbes. These "primary goods" are, in essence, means to any possible end, and are therefore good because desirable to all men, no matter what their end. Rawls says that money is one of the most important, if not the most important, of such goods. He does not realize that the maximization of wealth can only be considered unproblematically good if poverty is held to be a good by no one. But Christianity praised poverty; and Hobbes, who was quite aware of what he was doing, had to denigrate Christianity. His state-of-nature teaching is a substitute for the biblical account of man's original situation. One has to decide between these two positions

before an instrumental good can be considered simply good. Rawls really assumes that certain kinds of ends, for which the primary goods are evils, either do not exist or are untrue. He thus fails to present the radicalness of the political problem, which stems from the radical diversity of possible ends. He contributes to a narrowing of our horizons and an unfounded hopefulness about potential agreement among men. He accepts as a given Hobbes's transformation of religion or the world in which religion lives, and thereby reasons from a world that is unproblematic for him because, living in Hobbes's world, he no longer sees its problems. He is enabled to criticize Locke and Rousseau for intolerance when they proscribe certain religious beliefs from civil society because he sees that the religions can, contrary to Locke and Rousseau, live together in peace. What he does not see is that the religions he observes have been transformed by the Enlightenment thinkers and are only tame species of the genus religion. He utterly misses what Hobbes and Locke and Rousseau were doing. Religion is not a serious question to him. It is just another one of the many ends that can be pursued in a liberal society. He is unaware that liberal society is predicated on a certain understanding of religion, one that excludes other understandings. What is perhaps the most serious question facing a serious man—the religious question—is almost a matter of indifference to him.

I chose these two related matters of wealth and religion in Rawls because there is today a large measure of complacent agreement about them which needs most rigorous examination and doubt. The philosopher now, instead of waking us up, contributes to our sleep. Rawls is drawn completely into the circle of current opinion because he is closed to what is outside of it. He can say that universalization is not of the essence of Kant's moral teaching, showing that he has not reflected on what freedom is in Kant; he can call Nietzsche—perhaps the most extreme antiteleologist who ever lived, the man who called Darwin a teleologist—a teleologist; he can invoke Aristotle to support his view that the greatest possible complexity is desirable by referring to a passage where Aristotle says simplicity is best. If this were to be the type of nourishment provided by philosophy, our children would starve. Before we become attached to new answers, we must find out the questions.

We must turn to the greats of the tradition; but in a fresh spirit, as though they were unknown to us, almost as though they were prophets bringing news of unknown worlds and to whom we must listen with self-abandon instead of forcing them to pass before our



inquisition. Above all, we must put our questions aside and try to find out what were their questions. We must avoid the example of the compilers of the renowned *Syntopicon* who indexed *justice* in all the political philosophers. One junior researcher could find no discussion of justice in Locke's *Treatises on Civil Government* and saw that he almost never uses the word. The editor said there must be such a discussion. What would a catalogue of reflections on justice which did not contain the name of Locke be? So they had to invent a thematic discussion to which the index referred. And thus they missed a great discovery.

But who are these men to whom such reverent attention should be paid? How do we establish the names on a list when I am arguing that we are in large measure ignorant about what we need to know? One can begin from the general agreement about who the great philosophers were, especially the farther away they are in time and fads have dissipated. This is not canonic! The proof of the pudding is, of course, in the eating. But it is a beginning. A second and sounder criterion is what the thinkers say about one another. Spinoza's praise of Machiavelli turns us to reflections on Machiavelli as well as teaching us something important about Spinoza. Hobbes's attack on Aristotle shows us that Aristotle is the man to attack. It is almost always the case that serious men look to serious opponents and go to the roots of that which they wish to destroy. And following this same road, one finds writers neglected by us because the limitation of our views makes them seem slight or irrelevant. Machiavelli and Rousseau had the highest opinion of Xenophon; for us he is nothing. That difference or change in taste can point the way to fundamental problems, such as the different value once set on moderation even by the apparently immoderate Machiavelli and Rousseau. This procedure results in a relatively small number of classic books, a list established not subjectively by means of current criteria, but generated immanently by the writers themselves. I argue that there is a high degree of agreement among the writers themselves as to who merits serious consideration. The writers of quality know the writers of quality. Moreover, from this internal dialogue between the books emerges a high degree of agreement about the permanent questions as opposed to the questions of the day.

The closest reading of these books is my prescription. But there is so much that stands in the way of such a close reading, at least as the core of an education. To begin with, to follow Tocqueville's analysis of American intellectual proclivities, we are not a theoretical people. The appearance of uselessness goes counter to our concentra-

tion on utility. The notion of speculation for the sake of speculation is not one that accords with any inner experience of the dominant part of the regime, and seems even to contain an element of immorality, particularly in things political which touch the passions so closely. In political science over the past thirty years, there have been two trends in regard to political philosophy, trends apparently contradictory, but issuing from the same source. Either political philosophy has been rejected as ineffective, or it has been embraced as the source of commitment to revolutionary change as opposed to the conformist tendencies of political science as a whole. Men like Pascal, who thought the only thing that counted was the unremitting quest for the knowledge of God, are not native to our soil. Nor are men like Archimedes, who destroyed all of his writings on his extraordinary inventions in engineering because they smacked of low necessity. We believe our business is too pressing for such self-indulgence. *Relevance* was just another expression of our deepest instinct. And connected with this untheoretical nature is a distrust or contempt for tradition. As Tocqueville puts it, tradition has no authoritative status for us. It is just another piece of information. Authority is no doubt contrary to the philosophic spirit, but respect for tradition helps to keep alive and give respect to what would not otherwise be taken seriously. The Scholastics took Aristotle as an authority, which was surely a mistake. But thereby he was preserved and available for those capable of understanding. We, on the other hand, free from the prejudice in favor of old authority, are likely to neglect what it can teach us. The democratic principle tends to make every man the judge of what is worthwhile, and the authority of special intelligence is not more likely to be respected than that of wealth or birth, particularly inasmuch as it is less easy to recognize. There is an ever-diminishing impact of the books which gave men a common vision and a common spiritual substance. This is merely a culmination of the penchants Tocqueville so powerfully described. And the control on these penchants exercised by our intellectual tutelage to Europe, where philosophy and the literary tradition connected with it played a greater role and were more part of the real life of nations, has almost disappeared with our emancipation from them and the assimilation of their regimes and education to ours.

Our students, in addition to not loving books, possess two contrary dispositions which combine to undermine the study of books in the quest for truth. They are persuaded that values are relative, partly on intellectual grounds, partly because such a belief seems more conducive to democracy and tolerance. Thus they know beforehand that the books are wrong in their claim to decide questions of good and

bad. At the same time, they in general share an unquestioned and unquestionable—almost religious—conviction of the truth of the principle of equality. Since this is a contentious issue in the tradition, with many of the older writers against it, such writers seem to be teachers of vice rather than thoughtful men.

Once having overcome the prejudice against books, one is still only at the beginning of the task of a fresh look at them. Aside from the wide acceptance of historicism and positivism, which makes the claims of the older writers seem deluded, there are special doctrines which act as a screen between us and the books and give us the impression that we know what is most important about them before we begin reading them. The common view that economic or psychological or historical factors determine the thought of philosophers of course assumes that the philosophers are wrong, both because they all argue that thought can be free from any other determination than the truth, and because one must know that an opinion is untrue to explain its source in anything other than the truth. The sociology of knowledge is a misnomer; it can only properly be called the sociology of error. And if it is true that the philosophers are necessarily in error, then their study is the business of triflers. That it is important to know that Plato was an aristocrat or Hobbes a *bourgeois*, that Machiavelli was a man of the Renaissance and Montesquieu a man of the Enlightenment, that Rousseau and Nietzsche were mad seems so self-evident that it is almost impossible to see how one would proceed without such crutches. But as soon as one has accepted these commonplaces, one has subverted the study of the books, because such views teach us what to look for and take as facts what needs to be proved. They also presuppose that they emerge from a true framework, or one that is metaphysically neutral, that the practitioners of this scholarship cannot be subjected to a similar analysis. Almost all modern scholarship, beginning with classical philology, started from the assumption that its fundamental ideas were superior to those of the authors it studied and placed these authors in a context alien to them. Even such simple categories as idealist and realist, liberal and conservative are profoundly misleading although they seem to us as natural as night and day.

The only way to break out of this circle of subjectivism—and subjectivism it is, because, although arguing that it is objective, its adherents also admit somehow that they, too, are historically determined, and therefore tacitly accept that the next generation will interpret differently, making the philosophers nothing but the contradictory things various ages of scholars say about them—is to try to understand the philosophers as they understood themselves, to



try to determine their intention, accepting the possibility that they may have fulfilled their intention and attained the truth. This is a naïve undertaking, but the recovery of innocence can be salutary. It implies a severe rupture, not only with the presuppositions of modern scholarship, but also with its results. One can be heartened by the reflection that Thomas Aquinas was a very good interpreter of Aristotle, and Rousseau of Plato, without the enormous apparatus that now stands between us and the texts.

What does it mean to understand the authors as they understood themselves? For example, Machiavelli says that he was doing something totally new. This claim is not generally accepted. More and more he is assimilated, on the one hand, to earlier thinkers, and on the other, to the more conventional thought of his own time. As I just mentioned, he is called a man of the Renaissance. But if Renaissance means anything, it means the rebirth of classical Greek and Roman antiquity. Machiavelli, however, rejected both the thought and the practice of classical antiquity. He believed he had found a new and superior ground on which to erect the structure of politics. In adopting the myth of the man of the Renaissance, one assumes what one cannot know—what the Renaissance was really like, and whether there was a typical man and thinker—and distorts with this imaginary standard what we can know—Machiavelli's text. We note the similarities between Machiavelli and his contemporaries, and become blind to the differences separating them. This provides a second general maxim: in what appears similar, one should look for the differences; and in the different, the similar. But it is especially the differences on which one must concentrate. It is taken for granted that when Machiavelli adopts the language or the tone of his contemporaries that he does so fully and sincerely, but that when he argues for his peculiarity he is mistaken and vain. It is true that *The Prince* resembles the traditional mirrors of princes in some respects. But nothing in them resembles the teachings of e.g., *Prince XV* and *XXV*. Thrasymachus, to take another familiar comparison, surely agrees with Machiavelli that men pursue their private interest exclusively; he is "hardheaded," but he never suggests that this self-interest can be the basis of a policy conducive to the public interest.

All of these appealing generalizations are nothing but impediments. One should pick up *The Prince* and read it as though it were written by a contemporary, as though it were a personal communication to one about something of common concern. In this way we abandon the categories which we allow to become habitual due to a lack of a sense of urgency. A line-by-line, word-by-word analysis must be undertaken, for Machiavelli is a difficult writer and we do not have

the habit of reading carefully. The hardest thing of all is the simplest to formulate: every word must be understood. It is hard because the eye tends to skip over just those things which are most shocking or most call into question our way of looking at things. One simple definition of the philosopher is that he is the man who thinks concretely without the aid of abstractions which order things but at the same time really hide them. The study of great philosophers is an education in concrete consciousness, but it can easily degenerate into a support for abstractions. This is the reason the novelist and the poet are great helps to the philosophic intellect. They, at their best, stay close to particulars; and their rich consciousness of particularity, combined with judicious generalization, is a way toward the formulation of philosophic principle. This is why Plato and many others wrote in a form resembling poetry in which all explicit generalizations are false and the real generalizations are left to the reader to make for himself on the basis of the experience provided by the book. Thus the books are not only educations in concreteness but provide powerful lessons in the deceptiveness of easy generalizations and, properly studied, liberate us from them. In this way they make that union of *l'esprit de finesse* and *l'esprit de géométrie* of which I spoke earlier. He who reads books which do not display inquiry itself but its results, like those of Aristotle and Hegel, risks misunderstanding the depth and breadth of common sense experience presupposed by their general formulations. They write for those who are already philosophers. This is why, for us, the study of thinkers like Plato, Machiavelli, and Rousseau is most appropriate. They show the way as well as they present the end. Relying again on Tocqueville, there is a peculiar democratic addiction to general ideas. The tendencies which our regimes foster most need counterbalancing. The study of texts, however distant it may seem from the phenomenological movement, has a similar motive and is a reaction to the impoverishment of the world of experience as a result of general ideas and is an attempt to recover that world in order, ultimately, that one have better general ideas. I have implied earlier that the study of texts is superior as a means to this end, inasmuch as the new beginning requires a new self-awareness which is not likely to be obtained by unaided self-examination.

However that may be, in reading Machiavelli we tend to miss the obvious. The argument or example that seems irrelevant, trivial, or boring is precisely the one most likely to be the sign of what is outside of one's framework and which calls it into question. One passes over such things unless one takes pencil and paper, outlines, counts, stops at everything, and tries to wonder. Our failure to see is a result not only of laziness or lack of intelligence but of our unwillingness to

believe that Machiavelli could have thought or taught this or that thing. This unwillingness is a result either of our moralism or of certain notions about what men in the Renaissance thought. How often I have heard men of high intelligence, goodwill, and learning reject an obvious point, clearly stated in the text, with the remark, "No man in the sixteenth century could have thought such a thing!" To take another example, in the study of Plato, it is practically taken for granted that Socrates' trial was politically motivated and that the charge of impiety was only a pretext. This interpretation goes counter to everything the texts of the *Apology* and other dialogues say. Why is the text taken so lightly? Because from modern scholarship we learn that the Athenians were not serious about such things. The real source of that modern scholarly opinion is an argument made in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by men like Bayle, Gibbon, and Montesquieu that Christianity was the source of intolerance. They consciously rationalized Greek and Roman politics in order to present it as a favorable contrast in matters of religion to modern nations so much affected by the religions founded on biblical revelation. Thus the real charge against Socrates is ignored because we are influenced by earlier thinkers who knew what they were about. But we think we have founded our knowledge of the Greeks on scientific philology. The blindness to our own thought and to the text of Plato is fraught with consequences. The importance of religion and the critique of it in Plato is missed. This only supports the current easygoingness concerning the religious question about which I have spoken. The value of Plato as an articulator of problems we forget is thus lost. A curious contradiction in contemporary thought leads to the view that, on the one hand, the Athenians did not take the gods to be the most important beings and, on the other hand, that Socrates was conventionally pious. The text of the *Apology* teaches that Socrates was guilty as charged: that he did not believe in the gods of the city. And this is not a merely scholarly point, because the case of Athens and Socrates is typical, according to Plato. All cities must have gods, and all philosophers must doubt their existence. If this is the case, the rationalization of politics is impossible. The possibility of that rationalization is taken for granted in most of modern political thought. (Only Rousseau—the greatest modern reader of Plato—makes the rejection of that possibility an important part of his teaching. For this stand Rousseau is taken to be a crank.) And this belief is one of the most important and pervasive influences in contemporary politics. The alternative to it is obscured by apparent science. Just looking at Plato open-mindedly would free us from our prejudice.



Openness is the general principle in the study of texts. But it is a different kind of openness from that which is most praised today. Contemporary openness is based on closedness to the possibility of the truth of the thought of the past, whereas the openness required is one that can call into question our openness and the specific modern thought on which it is based. To achieve such an openness nothing more is required than deideologization and the love of truth. There are no universally applicable rules of interpretation, for each author has different intentions and a different rhetoric. Each must be understood from within. He must be worn like a pair of glasses through which we see the world. It is unlikely that we shall be able to read many books in such a way, but the experience of one book profoundly read will teach more than many read lightly, because the most important experience is not the dazzling succession of ill-conceived ideas, but the recognition of seriousness. He who has read one book well is in a position to read any book, while he for whom books are easy currency is rendered incapable of living fully with one.

In all this what may seem most perverse is my apparent denigration of scholarship, particularly historical scholarship. Books have something to do with the time and the language in which they were written, and they are full of references which only the learned can understand. It is almost inconceivable that it should be argued that we are not greatly aided by all the research of the last ages. And I would agree that learning is a good thing, if it is not learning for its own sake and if that learning serves the understanding of the books instead of encouraging the use of the books as raw material for the scholar's system. Another maxim is that our learning should be guided strictly by the author's understanding. We should learn about history from Machiavelli; look to those authors to whom Machiavelli refers us; take seriously the teachings he takes seriously. He should be our preceptor, and we should follow his curriculum.

The first thing a student will observe is that Machiavelli is written in Italian. If he does not know Italian, he must learn it. There are translations, but one cannot trust them. But if he learns Italian as the translators learned Italian, he might as well not learn Italian. For example, none of the translators translates *virtù* as *virtue*, at least not uniformly.<sup>1</sup> They say that it does not mean *virtue* in Machiavelli or in the Renaissance. When *virtù* seems to designate what the translator

<sup>1</sup>Now there is finally a very good translation, by Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr. (University of Chicago Press, 1985). Even he would agree, however, that this does not do away with the need to learn Italian.

thinks virtue is, he renders it virtue. When it does not, he will use *ability*, *ingenuity*, or whatever. But Machiavelli uses the same word and actually plays on the traditional use to indicate his transvaluation of values. In one place he uses it three times in two sentences, designating radically different things and thus says something very shocking. But the translators use three or at least two different words, thereby destroying the teaching. The problem is not one of philology, but of the conventionalism of mind of the translators. They think Machiavelli could not mean what he says. Inaccurate translation reflects inaccuracy of understanding, the tyranny of the scholar's prejudice over the matter to which he should be subservient. To learn Italian for the sake of understanding Machiavelli as the translators understand him is a waste of time. Most of the important words Machiavelli uses can be understood by following his use of them, and to do that requires no sophisticated science, just a lot of work. Anyone who takes the trouble to study Rousseau's use of the expression *le peuple* will find that this great friend of the people means pretty much the same thing as does Plato when he uses *dēmos*: the hopelessly prejudiced many. Someone might retort that one has to know Plato to recognize that. But Rousseau himself refers the reader to Plato in the clearest way. And this is only another proof that it is not Rousseau's own time that is most helpful in understanding him. Plato is much more important for interpreting Rousseau than is Voltaire. The education required for studying Rousseau can be learned from Rousseau. And incidentally, one gets a better understanding of Plato from a man of Rousseau's caliber than one would from the most learned philologist. This is only indicative of how the study of one author can lead to a grasp of the tradition as a whole and entirely from within.

Our students must, then, learn languages, and that is not to their taste. But they must be guided by their philosophic concern in the study of languages and not be carried away into the infinite labyrinths of philology. Far more important is that they keep thinking of the book of the world and comparing the words in the philosopher's book to the things in the world.

Similarly, Machiavelli talks about historical events and persons. Must we not know what happened in its fullness to see whether Machiavelli is right and how he interprets? But this presupposes that we have a true account against which to measure Machiavelli's account. In reality it comes down to accepting some modern historian's view as opposed to Machiavelli's. Moreover this supposes that Machiavelli's intention is to give an accurate historical account rather than to make a specific point for which he is willing to distort the facts. In *Prince II* Machiavelli speaks of two dukes of Ferrara as though

they were the same. But a moment's reflection will prove that this is intentional, that he wishes to indicate that in solid, traditional states it makes little difference who rules. In III he speaks of Louis XII's invasions of Italy. In VII and XI he gives very different accounts of those invasions. Putting the three accounts together, one can see that Machiavelli wishes to show that Italian politics are controlled and corrupted by the Roman Catholic Church. He first presents Louis as an independent actor, and gradually reveals, to those who pay attention, that Louis was the dupe of Alexander VI. This history can be constructed internally, and most scholarly history would stand in the way of recognizing it.

Finally, in *The Prince*, Machiavelli refers to other books, most especially the Bible and Xenophon. One is expected to know their significance. It goes without saying that Machiavelli counted on more cultivated readers than can today be expected, and we must make every effort to be what he wanted us to be in order to teach us. But, again, to understand the Bible or Xenophon, we must begin by recovering what Machiavelli thought the traditional understanding and use of these books was. He refers not to the Bible of the higher criticism, but to the Bible of the believers and the Church. To know the Bible one must be familiar with its text as it is written and at least have some sense of what it means to believe. Then Machiavelli takes over from there. All the contemporary erudition about the Bible does not help us see Machiavelli's interesting use of it—for example, how he rewrites the story of David and Goliath, or his blasphemies about Moses founding a people. Likewise, classical studies have reassured us that Xenophon is simple and a bore, so Machiavelli's learning from him the two forms of liberality—the legitimate, using other people's property, the illegitimate, using one's own—loses its sense. This passage in Machiavelli is essential for understanding his agreement and disagreement with Greek political philosophy. Machiavelli should teach us the wonders of Xenophon, whereas some classical scholarship has given Machiavelli a lesson as to Xenophon's defects.

Study of the texts in this way is an endless task; but so is the study of nature, and the two studies go hand in hand and are almost the same. This is the truly liberal study. One would, of course, ultimately become very learned by means of it. But the learning would have a coherent and authentic character, one related to the highest purposes of life. Great books are full of hidden references and quotes which reveal themselves only to initiates. But there is no shortcut to the initiation: the route goes only by way of the ever-deepening reflection on the books as they relate to the problems of the world.



An example of the kind of awareness which is not immediately accessible on the surface of the books, which is dependent on a history that emerges immanently from the books, can be drawn from Tocqueville. Tocqueville often is called a conservative and is almost always contrasted with Rousseau, the radical and revolutionary. These are categories—simple ones, ones that seem almost to be of perennial common sense—used in academic and popular discourse. History comes to the aid of these categories to explain Tocqueville's position as a result of reaction to the French Revolution, his aristocratic origins, etc., as opposed to that of Rousseau, the optimist of the Enlightenment, the resentful poor boy. All of this is very plausible and such explanations have a particularly exhilarating effect on the modern mind. But the more one really knows, the less one finds them helpful. I had always accepted this interpretation of Tocqueville, and only recently, forced by facts, my reflections have begun to take a different turn. Tocqueville rarely mentions Rousseau and speaks denigratingly of the *philosophes*. But, while studying *Emile*, I had to teach *Democracy in America*. On coming to the passage on the role of compassion in democracies I was compelled to recognize that it was based on the discussion of compassion in the *Emile*. Not only is the argument the same, but Tocqueville makes the same literary reference, to La Fontaine, as does Rousseau. The latter cannot be an accidental connection, for it is so idiosyncratically Rousseauian. Now this is not a minor question. Compassion is Rousseau's supplement to self-interest as the social bond. This is his correction of the natural right teaching of Hobbes and Locke. Tocqueville agrees with Rousseau that egalitarian society brings forth this disposition and that it is what tempers the selfishness of democratic principles of right. Beginning from there, I looked back over the whole scheme which Tocqueville used to analyze American democracy and realized how great a debt he owes Rousseau. The alternative facing modern man, according to Tocqueville, is egalitarian democracy or egalitarian tyranny. And this is precisely Rousseau's teaching. Aristocracies for both are dead; they were unjust but contained a certain real nobility which is likely to disappear in democracies. Thus the political project for Tocqueville is to preserve freedom in equality and a tincture of nobility in democracy. Such is also Rousseau's intention. What is the way of achieving freedom in equality? Small communities with religious foundations. That is straight Rousseau. The concentration on the size of community was Rousseau's restoration of a classical theme within the context of modern political thought which denied its significance. And the civil religion described in the *Social Contract* closely parallels Tocqueville's

descriptions of and prescriptions for religion in democracy. Tocqueville on the family, the role of women, the arts, the habits of mind, and even rhetoric is derivative from Rousseau. In his description of an Indian he once saw Tocqueville even echoes Rousseau's ultimate doubt about the superiority of civilized life for happiness, this again as over against Hobbes and Locke. Tocqueville looked at the king in America, whom Locke said was worse clothed, housed, and fed than the day laborer in England, and asked, as did Rousseau, whether the critical question was put by modern thought: is that king less happy?

One could say much more about this intimate relation between Rousseau and Tocqueville. But I limit myself to indicating the harmony of their views. Why then does Tocqueville not acknowledge his great teacher and why does he appear so moderate? One must look to his addressees and his explicit intention. He writes to reconcile the well-born and the well-educated to democratic principles and life, in order that democracy will not be torn apart by the opposition of its most talented elements and will be tempered by their leadership and participation. Rousseau was a red flag waved before such men. It was not vanity but prudence that caused Tocqueville to hide his debt to Rousseau. The more moderate tone is partly illusory, for Rousseau was much more moderate in expectation than is often thought. Moreover, the principles of the rights of man, revolutionary in the *ancien régime*, were no longer so after the revolution. That debate was over. Tocqueville's business was to make them work politically. I do not argue that Tocqueville is simply the same as Rousseau; but the more I think about it, the difficulty is more on the side of differentiating them than of assimilating them.

To conclude, I should like to say a word about Rousseau himself and the way he should be read. It is often noted that Rousseau is the philosopher who attacked philosophy. This is a blatant contradiction and would seem to stem from the vain love of paradox. But on living with Rousseau, one becomes aware that he attacks philosophy but praises Socrates. That would seem to be a continuation of the same paradox, for Socrates, the founder of political philosophy, did nothing but defend philosophy and try to make it appear divine. However, Rousseau makes it clear that Socrates lived in a world in which philosophy was new, where it was thought to be dangerous and it played no role in public life. Philosophy needed a defense in order to be preserved; it had to be made to appear to be good for political life. But the situation had changed in Rousseau's time. Philosophy was the rage; it had become the adviser to enlightened despots and the comforter and helper of the peoples. Philosophy was becoming a tool of

the prejudices and a servant of the selfish passions. For the sake of political virtue and the preservation of true philosophy, the public philosophy had to be attacked. The very opposition in speech between Socrates and Rousseau is indicative of the profoundest agreement in thought. Rousseau's critique of modernity—which means us—comes to light only by way of such reflections.

It is obvious that much stands in the way of the education I propose. Its actualization seems almost impossible—except that it is so simple, so available, and so charming. I have found that young Americans are seduced by the discovery of books—in a book-drenched society—books unadorned with alien paraphernalia. They are thirsty for clarity and inspiration, and they can find both so readily at hand. This is my hope, for almost all that is institutional stands in the way of the study of books. Such an education, whatever its other results, gives the students an experience of the possibilities of human greatness and of community based on shared thought that cannot fail to alter their expectations from politics.